

The President's Radio Address *March 28, 1998*

Good morning. In the storefronts and shop windows of Jonesboro, Arkansas, there are signs that read, "Our hearts are with Westside Middle School." Even though Hillary and I are far away from our home State, our hearts, too, are with Westside and with the grieving families whose loved ones were killed or injured in that tragic incident just 4 days ago.

This is the third time in recent months that a quiet town, and our Nation, have been shaken by the awful specter of students being killed by other young people at schools. We join the families of Jonesboro and all America in mourning this terrible loss of young life, life so full of promise and hope so cruelly cut short.

We mourn the loss of Natalie Brooks, of Paige Ann Herring, of Stephanie Johnson, of Britthney Varner, and of a heroic teacher, Shannon Wright, who sacrificed her own life to save a child. These five names will be etched in our memories forever and linked forever with the names of Nicole Hadley, Jessica James, and Kayce Steger of Paducah, Kentucky, and Lydia Kay Dew and Christina Mennefee of Pearl, Mississippi. Our thoughts and our prayers are with all their families today.

We do not understand what drives children, whether in small towns or big cities, to pick up guns and take the lives of others. We may never make sense of the senseless, but we have to try. We have seen a community come together in grief and compassion for one another and in the determination that terrible acts like these must no longer threaten our Nation's children.

Parents across America should welcome the news reported just this month by Attorney General Reno and Education Secretary Riley that the vast majority of our schools are safe and free of violent crime. We've worked hard to make our schools places of learning, not fear, places where children can worry about math and science, not guns, drugs, and gangs. But

when a terrible tragedy like this occurs, it reminds us there is work yet to be done.

I have directed Attorney General Reno to bring together experts on school violence to analyze these incidents to determine what they have in common and whether there are further steps we can take to reduce the likelihood of something so terrible recurring.

Already we've seen the remarkable difference community policing has made in our Nation's streets. Now we have to apply that same energy and resolve to our schools to make them safer places for children to learn, play, and grow. At school there must be full compliance with our policy of zero tolerance toward guns, and at home there should be no easy access to weapons that kill.

Protecting our children from school violence is more than a matter of law or policy; at heart, it is a matter of basic values, of conscience and community. We must teach our children to respect others. We must instill in them a deep, abiding sense of right and wrong. And to children who are troubled, angry, or alone, we must extend a hand before they destroy the lives of others and destroy their own in the process.

We have to understand that young children may not fully appreciate the consequences of actions that are destructive but may be able to be romanticized at a twisted moment. And we have to make sure that they don't fall into that trap.

Three towns: Jonesboro, Pearl, Paducah—too many precious lives lost. The white ribbons that flutter today in my home State of Arkansas are a poignant and powerful challenge to all of us, a challenge to come together for the sake of our children and for the future of our Nation.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 5:10 p.m. on March 27 in the library at the Cape Grace Hotel in Cape Town, South Africa, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on March 28.